

Tradition and Reaction
in
Modern Poetry

By

Laurence Binyon, LL.D.


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TRADITION AND REACTION IN MODERN POETRY

WHAT is there in running water which has a charm so intimate for the human mind? It is not only the liquid murmur that soothes delighted senses, it is something that at once stimulates and contents imagination, bearing us out of ourselves as if on the stream of a motion shared in idea without effort of our own. The secret of that charm is just the recognition that this sense of happy and unimpeded motion is elemental and native in ourselves. Life is movement, it implies incessant change. Whether we will it or no, our bodies are changing perpetually from birth to death, changing and renewing themselves from one moment to another. Is it so with our minds? I do not know. But I am sure that we are in perpetual danger of letting dead stuff accumulate in our minds, of acquiescing in a routine of received ideas, of becoming in bondage to words and customs. The standing pool, scummed over, choked with weeds, is the image of what with easy resignation we may let our minds become. But we are mostly tender of scrutiny in that direction and prefer to live unknown to ourselves. Only moral failings are thought—at times—worthy of the inspecting conscience.

The true artist is known by the purity, persistency, and success of his effort to attain an even greater intensity, precision, and power in expressing that which is in him and his experience of life. He wants to work free of all that is dead or half-alive, encumbering or enfeebling his expression with matter or form that is second-hand and not made his own, or accepted without faith from a former time's prestige, or is the fruit of his own indolence and haste. And the driving power behind all the movements in the arts of which much is heard to-day is the same; it is at bottom a desire to be more true both to the inner self and to the outer reality of the world; to express the relation of the human spirit to the universe with ever more veracity and fullness. There is only one movement that matters, the movement towards intenser life.

But the possibilities of experience are so vast, and human capacity so limited, that actually this movement shows itself as a pressure not steadily exerted in a single aim, but now in this direction now in that, some particular way seeming at the moment more desirable than any

other. And often it appears as an attempt to revive some past movement, as if mankind, in its hurry or the division of its aims, had lost something by the way and needed to retrace its steps and pick up the forgotten clue.

In the many movements that we see proclaimed about us there is generally an element of self-deception or misunderstanding, a narrowing limitation or a perverted emphasis, which obscures and disguises that imperious urging of the artist's fundamental instinct.

Movements in the arts usually arise as a reaction from tradition, or are conceived as such by those who start them. Movements when successful are called traditions. But success may mean loss of life.

Let us begin by making a distinction. We do not always use the word tradition in quite the same sense.

When we speak of the great tradition of English poetry we think of a long line of original poets. We do not think of those writers who lived by imitation of past excellence, we omit and forget them. It is the originality appearing in each age or generation which creates the tradition; it is a tradition of life. Each of these poets brought his own vivid freshness with him, though each was linked to his predecessor by inheritance, or by reaction, or more commonly by both combined. Every living tradition in the arts is always in danger, it must move or become stagnant and decay. The glory of our poetry is that it represents a lively, ever-changing, yet continuous current.

But there is another sense in which we speak of tradition, meaning a body of rules and conventions handed down as something sacred and unchangeable. There are minds which cling to these crystallizations of once-fluid impulses, as to rocks or citadels in a world of instability and unbelief. They forget that the impregnable fortresses are always taken in the end: victory is only to the mobile army. And there are minds of another temper which, thinking of all that mental superstition, dead matter in the mind, has done to clog and maim the human spirit, the stupidities and cruelties it has bred, are for cutting themselves clean away from the past and for stepping into a world stripped of illusion, self-sufficient and free. Yet we know very well that the human spirit cannot cut itself off from its past. Though change is of the essence of life, there also must be a living permanence. There must be continuity. For without continuity there is no growth. There is this continuity in the tradition of English poetry. But of tradition in the other sense, the body of rules and formal canons, it is remarkable how little has been carried down the stream. Such an academic tradition prevailed for a time

in the eighteenth century, but even then it was not so much a question of the imposition of abstract canons as an agreement on certain ideals of taste which permeated the whole life of the epoch.

Though we hear much general talk in one place or another of the necessity of throwing over tradition in poetry and striking out boldly on modern lines, I find myself wondering what, in England at least, is the tradition that is to be overthrown. The almost limitless freedom of English verse, the extraordinary variety both of English metres and of the subject-matter handled in them, the mixed and enigmatic character of English prosody: all these provide so fluid an element to work in that there seems nothing solid to react against.

There is one thing left, it is true: poetry itself. And we find a writer of to-day announcing (as I read the other day) that he always, before sitting down to write a poem, tries to catch himself in an unpoetical mood. I think I understand what he meant, and I will come to that point later on. But in general such conscious reaction as we see is against the formal tradition of poetry, against metre, stanza, and rhyme.

I will say something of this in a moment, because it raises questions of interest about the fundamental nature of poetry. But first let us try to see things in a rather larger light.

In years before the war I remember thinking at times, like other people, of Europe and its future, and, recalling the slow decay of Roman civilization, at once destroyed and reanimated by the injection of crude vigour from without, I could not help speculating what would happen to our civilization when it was ripe to decay from within (to some observers the moment has come already); where were the barbarous new races which should replenish its failing force with their injected energy? What Goths and Vandals were left us?

You know how superfluous was that speculation. There was no need to look outside Europe, or to some other planet, for the barbarians. They were all within ourselves. If there is any comfort or solace to be found in our humiliation, it is in the inference that this world of ours is after all not so old as we sometimes imagine; it is still young and has far to go.

Even before that material convulsion of Europe, even before the war, there was noticeable everywhere a spirit of disquiet and perplexity stirring in the arts, most obviously manifest in plastic and pictorial expression, but visible also in literature; a kind of fever, an almost exasperated craving for the violent, the elemental, the

barbaric, for energy and self-assertion at all costs. Virility and vitality became the cant words of praise in criticism and were used with as complete unintelligence as generally falls to the lot of such words. Was there in the mind of Europe some premonition or anticipation of the coming explosion into the world of action of primitive forces and instincts long suppressed? However that may be, the fact is to be noted. The cause of this feverish and disquieted spirit in the arts lies deeper than any aesthetic doctrine. It is entwined, I think, with that satiety of civilization which we are all prone to feel. We are uneasy and restless because, entangled in a complicated and multifarious existence, we seem to miss contact with the running stream of life. Perhaps we have an instinctive and just dread of the wonderful machines that we have created, the machines which threaten to become our masters. Prophets appear from time to time offering us a new diet or a new religion as the medicine for our malaise. And we listen to them, still haunted by that old hallucination of the beauty of a primitive existence, though we know that the savage we envy is entangled in a web of absurd fears and prohibitions at every step he takes, more enslaving than the most complex civilization. It is symptomatic of our age that in Tahiti there is (or was recently) a white man living naked on a mountain trying to reconvert the natives, too enamoured of European clothes and ways, to the simple life.

We can't get rid of our civilization, but we don't like it. We are conscious that we ought to create something better—far better—but we don't know how to reach that better state, and few know what their ideal precisely is. We all have our moments of sighing for the South Seas, yet we know that our business is somehow to mend and purify our own civilization. We know that in reality we are not civilized enough.

It is natural that these vague dissatisfactions and confused longings should appear in the arts, which express and release the inner desires of mankind, though we may well demand that they should express something more. And among the artists themselves, never was such a time of antagonized doctrines, of pullulating movements. Modern art is hag-ridden by theory. We might indeed say that all this was but a recurrence of an old phenomenon, the reaction against 'art made tongue-tied by authority', the revolt expressed in the cry 'Return to Nature'. If we insist on logic, the cry that art should return to nature is of course preposterous. The essence of art is that it is not nature. But we all know what is meant. The precedent condition of the arts, however, does not seem of a

nature to explain such a revolt. There was absence of authority, rather than repression by authority.

Success attracts. I am persuaded that the reactions in poetry to-day are in great part a repercussion from reactions in the world of painting, where what is known as the new movement has attained far more widespread recognition and success than in poetry. In reality the cases are quite different. The new movement in painting arose as a reaction from Impressionism. The strict doctrine of Impressionism (the practitioners were better than their theories) is perhaps the unsoundest theory of art ever formulated: it has proved also more cramping and tyrannical than the most academic canons of form. It conceived itself as the climax of the long effort of European art to grapple with the problems of representing Nature. But if this was the climax, what remained to be done? Suddenly it was perceived that representation was after all not the true end of art. Hence the violent recoil of the reaction; and in so far as it emphasizes design, and leaves the painter as free as the poet has always been, and does not tell him to sit down before Nature and record his visual impressions with a mind as empty as a sheep's, so far surely it moves in the right direction. But the point I wish to make is this. There was a definite reason for the reaction against Impressionism and against mere representation. There was no such reason in poetry, because there had been no such false theory prevalent to contend against.

But there is an attraction in movements: with many no doubt there is the hope that somehow the movement will provide them with talent, even if they don't possess it themselves. In any case it seems to promise the stir of life.

So writers of verse have thought to join hands with the painters, and strike forward from the exhausted past, and do something new for the sake of its newness. It is a sign of the disconnectedness of the arts in our day—is it also of our contented chaos?—that while the innovators in painting are exposing and emphasizing the rhythm of their designs, and laying violent emphasis on form, the innovators in poetry are doing exactly the opposite, are all for loosened form and unobtrusive rhythm. The painters get as far from Nature as they can, the writers try to approximate their verse to ordinary speech. No one, so far as I know, has called attention to this curious and unconscious disparity.

So far as English poetry is concerned, the reaction against metre, though it has not produced much significance, raises issues which are of general interest and worth discussing.

We need hardly waste words on those muddled minds which misconceive of art in terms of science, and imagine that poetry advances by stages of evolution. To such it may appear that free verse is an advance on metre, or an inevitable development from it. Suppose all poets to write in free verse, what is the next step forward (for we cannot be supposed to stand still)? Why not strike off the fetters of sense as well as of metre, and merely ejaculate interesting sounds? But Progress, alas, will not be content with this. We must move on. There is still something we can free ourselves from: sound. The new, the final step is—silence. Why not foreshorten the process, and arrive at the consummation at one stride?

The only question about free verse is not its supersession of other kinds of verse, but its capabilities as an additional instrument.

When we say 'free verse', what do we mean? Freedom from what? From the restraints and conventions of metre, and generally of rhyme also. But are metre and rhyme fetters: ornamental fetters, but still fetters? They often are, no doubt; but that is not their true function. Metre is an artistic resource, having a certain emotional effect. Rhyme is an instrument of emphasis and has also a connective value. Everything depends on their use.

All metre is rhythm. But the rhythm of a metre maintained on the beat of a regular pattern is poor, monotonous, and wearisome. With bad writers metre may be said to be a cheap substitute for rhythm.

'Speech-rhythm', says Mr. Bridges, 'is infinite. When words are merely strung together so as to fit into a poetic metre, much more of the possible beauty of rhythmic speech is sacrificed than can be gained by the rhyme and prescribed cadences that please a common ear.' We cannot but agree. But does not this seem to justify those who would discard metre? Does it not seem to follow that a poem should find its ideal form not in metre—a system of selected rhythms—but in speech-rhythms varied to suit every subtle change of mood?

I will try to answer that question in a moment. But here I should like to say that just in the recognition of the world of music to be won from speech-rhythms lies the new life which has already been brought into English verse in our day. It may have been partly reaction from smooth metres of Tennyson and the emphatic metres of Swinbourne, which had a cloying effect on the ear: in any case the change is there, though it has been going on gradually for years, and was never announced as a movement. Our classic metres are not founded on the principle of stress, our speech-pronunciation is.

All through our poetry, the stress continually asserts itself, as if by instinct, in verse which is nominally measured by the number of syllables. Without going into technical details, we may say that the natural stresses of speech have come to be used more and more openly as the foundation of verse-rhythm; our ears have become habituated to a wider and subtler range of verbal music; and people (I hope) are less prone than they were to try and force all verse which they read into some supposed iambic or trochaic scheme. The change in this respect during the last thirty years is very great. We are returning to rhythms of a kind which we find in quite early English verse. You may recall, for instance, the fifteenth-century carol:

He came all so still
Where his Mother was
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.

He came all so still
To his Mother's bower
As dew in April
That falleth on the flower.

I may be wrong, but I fancy that not so very long ago such rhythm as this would have been excused as primitive rather than accepted for its perfect felicity. It is the kind of rhythm our lyrists aim at now.

When Wordsworth revolted against the poetic conventions of the eighteenth century, he attacked its diction. He wanted the diction of poetry to be natural language. But his theory ignored the potent element of rhythm. Yet we know by experience that beauty of rhythm can give the plainest language the subtlety of distinction and lend even to conventional language a touch of mystery. I think that Shelley, though he seemed to be unconscious of his own innovations and rarely mentions technical questions, really did a greater work than Wordsworth in liberating the natural rhythms of our language. But after him, in the great Victorians, we find metre hardening again, becoming more literary and less in tune with speech, though the variety of metres practised or invented by these poets is remarkable. In our own day it is to the Poet Laureate more than any other that we owe the exploration of the world of beauty lying in speech-rhythms. Mr. Bridges has been by far the greatest innovator in the verse of our time; and it is his practice rather than any proclaimed theory that has influenced contemporaries so widely. Mr. Bridges, with all his various experiments, successful or unsuc-

cessful, has not discarded metre. In his latest poems, offered to the writers of free verse as a solution of their problems, the lines are strictly measured but the rhythm is quite free.

And now to return to the question raised a minute ago. Is not the ideal form of a poem a form which is created from within, not imposed from without? Surely it must be so. Yet, as a matter of fact and experience, it is found that artists work best under set limitations. And we are driven to inquire whether, after all, these do not answer to some necessity of human nature. Perhaps unconsciously we realize that we cannot conceive of human life as without the limitations of circumstances. A beautiful and victorious life is not one which abolishes circumstances, those conditions which often seem so strict and hard; it is one which uses those circumstances and conditions, and turns them to glorious account. Unchartered freedom is not so inspiring as it ought to be: its effect is more often than not to paralyse. It may sound delightful to play a game without any rules; but we soon find that it is such poor fun that we are driven to invent them.

We may ask, then, whether metre, or measure, does not correspond to some permanent instinct in ourselves and therefore come from within. For after all it was not imposed on poets in the beginning, and all the national poetries in the world, so far as I know, have this principle in their verse. Emotion creates rhythm. The moment of ecstasy utters itself, and there is born a song. A song without metre is a blurred thing; a song needs clean, clear ringing form of its own nature.

Take a complex form of poetry: narrative. It may be contended that prose is a superior medium to verse for narrative purposes. But if we are to have narrative verse, I think in practice it will be found that for short narratives metre gives far greater rapidity and intensity than free verse. Think of the ballads; think of a ballad like 'Edward, Edward,' and the tremendous effect of its condensed symmetry of shape. To talk of metre and rhyme being fetters in such a case is nonsense. They are weapons of edge and force. And for long narratives I think a poem in metre is likely to be less monotonous (and monotony is the great danger) than a poem without it. This may seem a paradox. For a poem which is quite free in rhythm ought surely to be more various than one which follows a regular pattern. Theory again conflicts with practice. For when a poet writes in metre, instinct impels him toward continual variety. When on the other hand he discards metre and starts with variety as his only basis, there is nothing to stimulate his invention; his

instinct impels him toward a certain uniformity, and his rhythm tends to be more monotonous, if it has any shape of verse at all, than continued variations on a single pattern.

It comes to this: that some element of resistance stimulates and fortifies. Free verse is a soft medium, it gives neither resistance nor support.

I think that metre is traditional in the sense that human nature is traditional with man. And the great metres of the world are in a sense the creation of the race rather than an individual; they cause something of that emotion which is evoked by ceremony long-descended and mysteriously appealing.

Moreover, since every poet is, like every human being, a unique personality, he cannot, if he is a poet at all, use a traditional metre or stanza without making of it something new. Blank verse has been written for some centuries; but those poets who write it now have made, each of them, a blank verse of their own, differing from each other and differing from their predecessors. The beautiful 'Vine-Dresser' of Mr. Sturge Moore is written in the stanza of Keats's 'Nightingale'; but few readers, I think, would perceive this, till their attention was called to it, so fresh a thing has been made of the stanza. The illustration might be multiplied. Here tradition appears in its beauty as a tradition of life, not of dead routine.

Perhaps I ought before this to have defined more precisely the sense in which I am using the term free verse. The term comes from France. I am not learned in the history of French verse, but *vers libre* is at least as old as Molière. You will remember in 'Le Malade Imaginaire' how Cléante apologizes for his little impromptu opera. He says 'You are only going to hear "de la prose cadencée ou des manières de vers libres"', such as passion and necessity inspire in two persons who talk spontaneously and impromptu.' It was a kind of verse suitable for improvisation, and good enough for a libretto.

Vers libre was taken up as a medium for serious poetry rather more than a generation ago by Gustave Kahn in Belgium and others in France: and the English and American writers of free verse to-day seem to be influenced as much by French models as by Walt Whitman, perhaps more so. French prosody being so much stricter than our own, *vers libre* has been a term of wide application in France.

The Fables of La Fontaine are currently described as *vers libre*. Our verse is so free already, that English 'free verse' has to be very free indeed; and I am using the term for verse where there

is no formal pattern at all, no idea of measure, no expectation of recurrence.

The outstanding example in our language is Walt Whitman. He had something new to say, and found he could not say what he wanted in the recognized forms of tradition.

Of course there are many earlier examples of that natural satiety with the forms of verse in vogue which have led poets to new experiments. There are the unrhymed lyrics of Campion, Collins's 'Ode to Evening', Southey's 'Thalaba', Shelley's 'Queen Mab'; but these kept the ordinary so-called iambic or trochaic movement, only discarding rhyme, and in the case of 'Thalaba' and 'Queen Mab' observing no regularity in length of line. Macpherson's 'Ossian' is different: it is a rhythmical prose, purporting to be a translation from verse, and imitating the effects of the English Old Testament poetry.

Blake, in his *Prophetic Books*, proclaimed a sort of free verse as his ideal, but he was too impatient to work out a satisfactory substitute for the blank verse of tradition.

Matthew Arnold's 'Strayed Reveller' is again a different case, being no doubt imitated from Goethe's and Heine's free-verse poems, which I imagine were in their turn modelled on a misunderstanding of Greek lyrics. There are beautiful things to be found in these various experiments, but they have created no strong tradition. Whitman stands apart, and chiefly because of his subject-matter. I myself think him a great, if an incomplete, poet. He writes from an imperious impulse, he is a master of large and heroic imagery, as of pregnant and vivid epithet, and beautiful rhythms are frequent in his poems, though they have an accidental character. In his most inspired passages, the imaginative emotion creates a rhythm so strong that you might well think that some metrical principle was behind it; and I expect a careful analysis would discover such a principle. When inspiration slackens, the rhythm trails off brokenly and becomes flat and dull, or disappears. We are offended by a sense of waste and raggedness, a want of clean workmanship. Whitman is possessed by his matter: but in the main I think his poetry reads like a translation from something which we conjecture to be finer and better-shaped than what we actually read.

Whitman's verse is never prose. It has not the structure of prose. Regarded as organized speech, it is extremely primitive: it is largely little more than a series of ejaculations. The natural structure of prose is quite different, prose being a medium primarily addressed to the intelligence, poetry to feeling and imagination.

Prose explains, connects, qualifies, where poetry suppresses little links of reason, takes leaps, and achieves its aim by repeated strokes, never relying on the mere sense of what it utters. Poetical prose has but a bastard kind of beauty, easily appearing over-dressed.

I repeat, then, metre is an artistic resource; its strictness is a better foundation for variety than absolute freedom: and, more than this, it is, for most poetic purposes, the natural concomitant of verse. Free verse—I speak as one who has written it and enjoyed writing it—is an additional instrument and has no doubt its own future, but its scope, I think, will never be otherwise than very restricted, both because it is only suited for certain moods and certain matter, still more because, to write successfully without metre needs stronger inspiration, more mastery of rhythm, and a severer sense of form, not less discipline but a greater discipline, than to write in metre.

The chief value, it seems to me, of a challenge to metre and a movement towards non-metrical and unrhymed verse is to make us more scrupulous and exacting with ourselves in our use of metre and rhyme. The challenge is needed. We should use them not because they are customary and accepted, but for the virtue that is in them. I should not wonder if rhyme were to become less frequent than it has been. Most of the rhymes that come readiest are by now rather stale. But apart from this, rhymes are frequently used where they have no real effect and where no one would miss them if they were not there. A few rhymes used in the right places tell as much as many. Imperfect rhymes or assonances may come to be used deliberately. What pleases the ear of one generation will rarely please that of the next.

It is interesting, for some of us at least, to discuss these matters. But it is at the same time of course perfectly idle. For we all know that when the right voice speaks to us we shall listen to it and shall not care the least whether the verse be free verse or chiselled stanzas, or whether the form be old or new.

In current criticism, or what passes for such, we often see a sharp line drawn between 'traditionalists' and 'moderns', whether in art or literature. But the differences usually emphasized are external merely. It is as if one were to assume that every one who chose to dress unconventionally was a rare and distinguished spirit. This is sometimes but not always the case.

Change in method of expression is nothing except as it is the outcome of a change of mood, a new vision of life.

But if there is no vital change in method of expression save what

comes inevitably from change of mood, may it not well be claimed that there is something new in our age which demands a new kind of expression? Is it the astonishing changes in external life our generation has seen and experienced, the multiplicity of machines, the enormously quickened pace of existence?

Well, that is just the claim of the Italian Futurists, and it has found expression in the drama on the Continent, especially in Italy and Russia.

This is simply a blind alley. The arts will not get very far on those lines. For they will be following theory, not instinct. And poetry is not going to thrive on sensations and impressions. It is sensations and impressions which seem to provoke a great deal of the experiments of our day in verse. And perhaps this may explain why so many of these experiments exhibit so singular an insipidity of rhythm—flatness relieved by jerks and jolts—so that you might think this new tradition already exhausted. I quoted a little while ago the case of the poet who tried to be in an unpoetical mood when he wrote. He was speaking paradoxically no doubt. What is good in the youth of our day is its horror of unreality. This leads to impatience with complacencies and self-deceptions, with acquiescence in accepted ideas; and that is excellent discipline and preparation. But this passes easily into moods of disgust and fatigue, and into acceptance of these as something savouring of reality. Such moods do not engender in poetry any powerful spontaneous rhythm. You get what is perhaps even worse than inflated prose—deflated poetry.

After all, poetry is at root a primitive and passionate thing: like love, like religion. It does not live in the suburbs of our nature, nor by observation or the culture of impressions or the assertion of opinions. Such things are taken up as themes by those who dread (like so many to-day) to write stock poetry and think that poetic themes are all exhausted. There is indeed no limit to what may become a poetic theme in the right mind; there is nothing common or unclean to a great poet, the depth of whose vision can see all life in its significant relations, and nothing detached in its own smallness. He continually transforms fact into idea. But the central themes of poetry remain the same. What do I mean in the world? What does the world mean to me? These questions are always the same, but the answer is always new. All the more must it be new, since upon us has come the vision of a world unimaginably complex beyond the dream of our forefathers. In endeavouring to conceive more adequately and profoundly the world without us and the world

within us, poetry will find its task and inevitably will discover in that effort new ranges of music in language.

It is idle to proclaim that poetry should express the spirit of the age. It does that whether consciously or unconsciously; it can't help it. The only relevance to poetry of changes in our daily existence is the change they cause in our interior attitude to the universe, in the life of the human spirit. That we are over-busy with the surface of life is no reason for poetry and art to reflect that fever and bustle; rather should they embody, passionately embody, the interior, the imaginative life. The spirit of art is against the spirit of the age. Perhaps it always has been so, however much we may idealize certain favoured periods in the past. Certainly we know that it is so now. We express our own age by resisting it, by creating something which will outlast its fevers and its disillusion.

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